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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)  
SUBJECT: MAY 17 ELECTION TIMETABLE

REF: A. ALGIERS 206

- [1](#)B. ALGIERS 109
- [1](#)C. ALGIERS 30

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On February 15 President Bouteflika decreed that national elections will be held May 17 to replace the lower house of parliament, the National Popular Assembly. In doing so, Bouteflika pointedly did not take the public advice of his prime minister and schedule concurrent elections for local councils -- something that other political parties and the minister of interior had declared unfeasible. The decree set forth a timetable for campaign activities leading up to the balloting. An open voter registration period will be held through February 28; political parties have until April 1 to submit their lists of candidates to the government; and free media access will be accorded to qualifying political parties approximately three weeks before the elections. Attention inside and among the parties is now focused on whether to coordinate their candidate lists in districts where partnership makes sense. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Key representatives of the major Algerian political parties expressed satisfaction with the February 15 decree on the elections. While there had been much speculation that the elections would be scheduled concurrently with voting for local councils (ref A), the decree made no mention of the local elections. They are now expected to take place sometime in the fall, as originally planned. The February 15 decree was a slap in the face of Prime Minister Belkhadem, who had publicly called on President Bouteflika to combine the elections. Political activists had told us that the FLN, as the largest party, was best positioned to wage two simultaneous campaigns and stood to benefit most from holding combined elections. They also agreed, however, with Interior Minister Zerhouni's public observation that holding simultaneous elections was unworkable.

#### ELECTION TIMETABLE

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[1](#)3. (C) The decree established the election timetable. New voters and voters who have changed address since they last voted have from February 18-28 to register their current information with local officials if they want to cast a ballot in May. (Note: Algerian election law requires that all voters be given the opportunity to register or update a previous voter registration in October each year, but the ministry of interior has the option of declaring supplemental registration periods, like the current one, in advance of elections. End Note.) Political parties must submit their candidate lists to the interior ministry no later than April

1, at which point the campaign will begin in earnest. Free broadcast media access accorded to qualifying political parties under Algerian law will begin 23 days before the election (Algerian law requires media access for 21 consecutive days prior to the balloting, but also requires a media blackout period starting two days before the vote). It remains unclear when political parties will be able to review the revised lists of registered voters. Party representatives have told us that the interior ministry has promised them a CD-ROM containing the data for all of Algeria. The ministry has not given a delivery date, however, and is not legally required to supply parties with the data.

#### FACTORING ALLIANCES INTO PARTY LISTS

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¶4. (C) On February 25, visiting NEA/MAG Director Hopkins and PolEc Chief met with MPs from Islah (an opposition, Islamist party); the Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP, an Islamist party in the ruling coalition); and the FLN (the largest party in the coalition); as well as with a senator from the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD, an opposition, Berber-based party). All said their parties were fully satisfied with the way the technical process was unfolding, adding that the internal preparation of their lists of candidates by wilaya (province) was their primary concern between now and April 1. FLN MP (and Vice President) Sabah Bounour observed that many members of her party were questioning the benefit of remaining in the "presidential alliance" with MSP and the National Rally for Democracy (RND). MSP MP Mokri Abderezzak and RCD Senator Rachid Arabi countered that even the FLN could not obtain an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections and would need a governing partner or partners. Bounour's observation was reinforced in the media February 26, when Prime Minister Belkhadem was quoted as having ruled out the creation of common candidate lists among the three alliance parties.

¶5. (C) In a separate conversation, RCD National Communication Secretary Mouhcene Belabbas -- whose party boycotted the last

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parliamentary elections -- affirmed that the real issue for smaller political parties was deciding what, if any, alliances to form in advance of submitting lists for the various electoral districts. He observed that parties wishing to form a coalition would need to decide among themselves how to maximize potential votes for their alliance and opt out of competition in districts where a partner party had a greater chance of success. The coalition-building process, not the creation of candidate lists themselves, was the challenge in RCD's view.

#### COMMENT

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¶6. (C) Prime Minister Belkhadem has misstepped twice with the president in as many months. In January, he called on Bouteflika to reshuffle the cabinet -- a request met with stony silence from the Presidency. In February, he recommended publicly that the national and local elections be held simultaneously, only to see the interior minister announce within days that the parliamentary elections would be held alone in May. A couple of senior retired officials with close ties to the president told the Ambassador recently that Bouteflika was irked by Belkhadem's efforts to pressure him. The PM may now be showing public confidence about the FLN's chances in the May elections, but the president's double rebuff has sent the clear signal that, in terms of the political process, it remains Bouteflika and not Belkhadem who is very much in charge.

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